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Conclusion: What is to be Done?

One afternoon I accompany Emily on the daily trip she makes to drop her two children off at school. She combines her work as a project officer for one of Ghana's leading NGOs with domestic responsibilities for the loose network of extended family that live in her house. That is partly why she is late, and in a hurry; and that is partly why she is bemoaning the poor state of the roads. Although this frustration is particular, she sees it as an indictment of the country more generally. 'I find it so frustrating that nothing in this country ever seems to improve. You think you are getting somewhere but then something happens – there is a new government or the donors change tack and then all the good work is un-done.' Later, in a more sanguine moment, she reflects on this frustration. 'I think that the difficulty is that if you live here you have to accept things the way that they are. If you don't do that then you just go mad – there is too much that needs doing and if you take that all on yourself... Well there's no way you can do it.' But if fatalism is sometimes necessary for personal sanity, it is also problematic: 'You see that's the tension. Personally it might be better just to sit back and put your feet up – just accept that that's the way things are. But if you're committed to trying to change things for the better then you also have to hold on to your frustrations. You have to keep dreaming – have to keep believing – or else you have nothing. And if you dream you are often going to be frustrated by how things are and how they turn out.'

Emily articulates what I take to be a more fundamental tension for Ghanaian development workers. Regardless of ideological persuasion, they express commitment to the prospect of a different and 'better' future. They know that this future may not come true and are chastened by past experiences. They know that idealism alone will not be enough, and so they seek to find practical ways of implementing these.

‘Practice’, in this sense, constitutes a constant attempt to close a gap between this future prospect and existing circumstances: an attempt to level the difference between ‘ideology’ and ‘reality’. By the same token ‘ideology’ constitutes a constant opening up of this gap – a way of looking at ‘what is’ from the perspective of ‘what might be’; a way of perceiving reality in terms of absences, gaps and deficiencies that call for intervention.

For these development practitioners, to hope for development is therefore to hold in abeyance the cynicism that sees change as impossible and the fatalism that sees change as the inevitable unfolding of processes beyond individual control. The hope is not naive, attended as it is, by heightened awareness to the possibility of ‘failure’. For these development workers, ‘hope’ and ‘despair’ are not mutually exclusive alternative possibilities but inside-out versions of one another: it is against the hope of a better future, that development workers experience despair at the present; it is that despair that in turn stimulates further hope. Movement between these states can sometimes be experienced as personally frustrating or even upsetting. Nonetheless development workers locate the source of their quest for ‘action’ in this movement. They hold – and even cultivate – frustration as a stimulus to change.

If this obviation between hope and despair constitutes a distinct way of perceiving the world, development workers also include themselves within that world. Ghanaian development workers are forced to work within particular institutional and political structures but do not embrace these structures uncritically. They are aware that the institutional apparatus and discourses through which development interventions emerge can be as much part of the ‘problem’ as part of the ‘solution’. At times they profess fear of getting ‘caught’ in the process: that their own actions and thoughts are carried by ideological influences beyond their control and at a tangent to

their beliefs. Still, they hold that development presents institutional possibilities and resources that can be practically exploited for their own ideological ends. Confronted by an institutional reality that they see as problematic, they continue their work, claiming that doing something, however compromised, is better than doing nothing.

Here, too, it is the hope of a better future that prompts despair about a lack of ‘ideology’ or the ‘selfish’ and ‘corrupt’ ways in which particular development professionals sometimes act. Development workers cultivate particular forms of moral self against which they measure their own and others’ actions. As much as they recognise the need to act on the world, they also recognise the need to re-configure the people and institutions that ‘do’ the developing. Accordingly they recognise that hope for a better society can at times conceal a more selfish set of personal aspirations. They also recognise that interventions undertaken in good faith can at times have negative consequences. In moments of self-reflection and self-doubt, they even include themselves in these assessments. Still they hope for better forms of development, even while, and even because, they know that development has often ‘failed’. That hope sometimes originates in religious faith, and is also spoken of *as* a kind of faith.

Since Ferguson’s (1994) seminal study of Lesotho, the metaphor of the machine has permeated the quest to understand development practice. If the machine’s effect is to remove politics from the ‘product’ of development, focusing on the production of development discourses acts to make political dimensions re-appear. This machinic imagination has been important in highlighting the role of systems and processes in development practice and in bringing to light some of practices that underlie surface representation. The metaphor conjures images of an impersonal set of systems and processes and of a disenchanted rationality. Even where people do enter

this picture, they tend to be presented as cold and calculating – themselves dupes of bigger ‘social’ and ‘economic’ processes, or extensions of the logic of the global machine in which they participate.

If development practice can usefully be imagined in terms of machine-like systems and processes, then my suggestion is that it is also important to consider the people who ‘operate’ these systems – and how and why they do so. A central argument of this book is that if we put these people back into our accounts, a different and more nuanced picture of development begins to emerge. We start to see the complex processes in which development workers have to engage in order to keep things working – how the coherence of development is wrested from the contingency of practice. At the same time, it becomes apparent that development organisations are populated by people with complex motives and ideological outlooks that elude any straightforward categorisation.

I hope this picture adds ethnographic nuance to existing understandings of development. By extension, since I suggest the two are indissolubly linked, I hope this also refines our understanding of the post-colonial public sphere. But how does an empirical description of ‘what is’, relate to development workers’ own concerns with ‘what could be’? What does this attempt to describe the ‘actual’ reveal about ‘the possible’. In other words:

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

In the epilogue to *The Anti-Politics Machine* (1994), Ferguson raises precisely this question. In different ways, it is the central question that frames the activities that various development professionals engage in and the activities that academics undertake in trying to understand and analyse these. Ferguson’s own answer is to

suggest that posed at the level of ‘the masses’ there is not one question but many. Different people face different problems. Since the people who actually face these problems are likely to know most about them, it seems presumptuous to offer prescriptions:

The toiling miners and the abandoned old women know the tactics proper to their situation far better than any expert does. The only general answer to the question, ‘What should they do?’ is that: ‘they are doing it!’ (1994: 281)

I take from this two important points: firstly, that if the question of what to do is to be meaningful, it has to be posed in specific terms; and secondly, that before proffering ‘solutions’ it is important to pay attention to what is *already* being done.

Yet in his analysis of the activities of development organisations, this nuanced attention to the specificities of practice, gives way to broad-ranging critique:

There is little point in asking what such entrenched and often extractive elites should do in order to empower the poor [because] their own structural position makes it clear that they would be the last ones to undertake such a project. If the governing classes ask the advice of the experts, it is for their own purposes, and these normally have little to do with advancing the interests of the famous downtrodden masses. (1994:280-1)

This suggestion that the many organisations, activities and practices that go by the name of development, are *only* a part of the problem seems unhelpful.

As I hope my account makes clear, development comes into being as the intersection of a multiplicity of people, ideas, institutions and technologies. In engaging in the practices that bring these together, Ghanaian development practitioners are themselves asking and answering the question of ‘what is to be done?’ Even where they ask this in the singular (as if there were *an* answer), the situations in which they pose it are different. In practice, there are a multiplicity of ways in which the question is asked and answered.

In relation to development professionals, as much as for ‘the masses’, I therefore propose that before asking ‘what is to be done?’ we first need to ask the question of what is *already* being done. In doing, so it is unhelpful to pit the workings of ‘development’ against the activities and beliefs of ‘the masses’, as if the only important distinctions lay ‘between’ these. More helpful is to look at how different ways of enacting development draw together different groups of people with different consequences. Still the question remains: what does my account do?

CRITICAL PROBLEMS

Perhaps primarily I hope that taken in the round, it presents descriptive and analytic possibilities that have an effect on existing theoretical formulations, that is less a new theory than a way of re-perceiving what the role of theory might be. Ferguson’s (1994) deconstruction of development discourse has helped pave the way for much of the critical analysis that has followed. In this vein, ‘post development’ critics have questioned received understandings of the concept of ‘development’. Rather than a benign force for good, ‘development’ has increasingly come to be understood as the very means by which powerful nations reinforce their economic and political power.

In different ways, post-development scholars have attempted to understand the mechanisms by which this occurs. Starting from the premise that the ‘power of development’ (Crush 1995) derives from its capacity to ‘conceal’, critics have sought to ‘un-cover’ the processes by which it ‘really’ works. In particular, post-development scholars have directed attention beyond the overtly neutral and objective language of development organisations to the political motives taken to animate these. If power is driven by disguise, then the role of critical scholarship is a critical un-masking of the political relations that underlie ‘surface’ representations. The post-development critique can be seen as a ‘stripping back’ of the ‘myth’ of development; an attempt to set aside ‘surface representations’ in order to reveal the ‘real’ dynamics at work.

The arguments and analysis presented in this book do not disprove these ideas. It has not been my intention to debunk such theories in the name of a more ‘real’ truth about processes and practices through which development works. Yet the tendency for scholars to engage with development through such forms of critical deconstruction creates problems. Although post-development scholars have roundly criticised the objectivist traditions of development, their own concern to locate the ‘real’ mechanisms by which such organisations operate works through a similar realist ontology. Development critics have assumed that the world is divided into fetish and fact, even as they have debated where this line is drawn (cf. Latour 2004). Development knowledge has been taken as a social, economic and political ‘construction’. In this way, critics’ own analytic tools (‘society’, ‘politics’, ‘economics’ and so forth) are ascribed an un-questioned ‘reality’ against which the knowledge and understandings of ‘development’ are de-bunked.

Rather than debunk development, I have outlined how different people and things are gathered together in maintaining it (a stance that parallels Latour’s ‘new

critical attitude' (Latour 2004)). Rather than reduce development to an analytically external reality I have tried to *add* to the reality of development by multiplying description of the practices, relations and ideologies through which projects practically unfold. Since the object of 'development' is produced through a multiplicity of ideas, people, technologies and practices, I have attempted to describe these practices without recourse to any singular logic, and without subsuming these to a singular theory.

Attending to the multiplicity of realities through which development is produced is an act (cf. Mol 2002: 151-2); it is something I have done through multiple processes of writing and research. I hope this makes explicit what development practitioners leave un-said. I have attempted to add to the understandings that development workers produce (documents, texts, discourses) in order to highlight the practices required to produce these. This has meant foregrounding the common-places of development practice: actions and ideas that go without saying because they come without saying (Bordieu 2003). In situating previously discrete practices and utterances alongside one another, their meaning is altered. Connections have been drawn out on the basis of, connections latent in 'the field', though the result is not reducible to these. Accordingly I hope this account adds something new to the practices it describes, even as I am aware of all it takes away.

Development paradigms shift with alarming speed. The history of development is littered with well-meaning theorists' failed attempts to provide all-encompassing answers. New proposals proliferate; attempts to fill the 'gaps' that 'failure' creates. But if these failures are not so much *theoretical failures* as *failures of theory* (the quest for abstract, all encompassing solutions), perhaps there are already too many.

Rather than a new theory, I therefore offer this account as an attempt to subtly re-perceive what *already* happens; to shift perspective so as to be able to see what already takes place but in a new light. I have done so with the intention of amplifying understanding of what is productive and useful about these practices, rather than in order to denigrate what is not (Mol 2002).

This does not amount to a wholesale endorsement of ‘development’ – as though it *were* a unified ‘thing’ to be endorsed or denounced. As I have suggested, development involves the intersection of many people and things. Not all of them are ‘good’; but neither are all of them ‘bad’. I hope that part of the utility of the approach I have taken is in being able to differentiate the multiplicity of people, ideas and practices through which development is constituted, so as to move the discussion of ‘development’ onto a less abstract footing (Yarrow and Venkatesan forthcoming; (cf. Quarles Van Ufford and Giri 2003). I am proposing that we try to recuperate a sense of the generative potential of certain understandings and practices that have tended to be overlooked in the constant search for a new policy panacea. This means recognising that important complexities and ambiguities get overlooked when academics try to explain development as a singular, overarching system of knowledge.

If this conclusion is what my account theoretically ‘does’, I hope it might in turn prompt reflection on how development could be done differently. My following suggestions are not intended as programmatic statements but simply highlight what I take to be latent possibilities. I outline these in relation to three key suggestions:

1. *‘Transparency’ is not the only kind of accountability.* As this book has sought to make explicit, informal relations – friends, ‘contacts’, personal relations – are central

to the enactment of ‘civil society’ and to the functioning of development organisations more generally. From the perspective of recent advocates of ‘good governance’ these relations seem problematic. They are not ‘open’ and ‘transparent’: inclusion or exclusion from them is not on the basis of a universal and explicit set of criteria. Yet the fact they are not formally accountable does not mean they lack accountability; the fact that their usefulness is rarely made explicit does not mean that they are not useful. Informal practices and relationships may well be in the public interest, even if they are not publicly visible (Cohen 1981: 128). Indeed it is precisely their lack of formal visibility that, at times, enables personal relations to work effectively. (For example, maintaining autonomy from the state or from donors depends being able to organise independently from these). This is not to suggest that ‘informal’ relations constitute an alternative to formal institutional procedures. Rather I want to highlight that these are mutually implicated forms of practice. Hence the existence of the former need not undermine the latter (DuGay 2000: 56).

Given that the informal nature of such relations constitutes their very condition of possibility, there is clearly no sense in which their promotion could ever be a meaningful policy objective. However, recognising the importance of these relations *does* make the case against the over-determination of policies that close-down the space in which such relations operate and emerge. In particular, the normative valorisation of ‘transparent’ relations under the guise of ‘good governance,’ undermines the effectiveness of relations that do not conform to these logics. At best these initiatives provide a way of re-describing relations that already exist in terms more acceptable to an external donor audience; at worst the pursuit of ‘transparency’ and ‘accountability’ undermines the very forms of relationship and

practice required to bring this about. Perhaps in this sense, less policy might be better policy.

2. *Embrace contingency.* A variety of otherwise disparate accounts have assumed development to be an ordered and coherent system. This book does not dispute the existence of order, but takes this to be an active achievement of development practice. In other words, coherence is an outcome of *ordering* (Law 1994) activities that are not themselves reducible to the logic of an over-arching system. Although this insight is effectively a description of a set of processes that already take place, it does have potential consequences for the way in which we understand, value and think about these. If coherence is ‘after the fact’ (Mosse 2005b) of the practices and relations that produce it, we need to pay more attention to the importance of these practices and relations. In particular I have highlighted the attempts of various development workers to ‘make things work’ in situations where no easy ‘solutions’ exist. This means valuing the contingent and sometimes haphazard practices through which people, technologies and artefacts are brought together. Here, again, it is clearly absurd to imagine that the promotion of such practices could ever be a meaningful policy objective. Rather I underline the point that if policy objectives over-determine the space in which development workers operate, valuable practices may be undervalued if not actively undermined.

3. *Less can be more.* Scholars of development in general, and anthropological studies of development in particular, have been critical of dualisms and oppositions on the grounds that these conceal the complexities of social reality for development workers and for scholars alike (Crewe and Harrison 1998, Escobar 1995, Gardner and Lewis

1996). Rather than view these as opposed to 'reality', my account demonstrates how oppositions are in fact integral to the ways in which relationships are formed and negotiated in the context of development interventions. A focus on the related oppositions between 'local' and 'global', 'indigenous' and 'western' and 'policy' and 'practice', highlights the complex organisational processes through which such oppositions are created and sheds light on the ways in which these are used to frame social relations and identities. My account demonstrates the relational ways in which oppositions are drawn upon, and the highly specific distinctions that they are used to make. Against the grain of recent post-development critiques, this perspective suggests that the extent to which such oppositions are useful or problematic, empowering or disempowering, can only be gauged in relation to specific encounters.

BY WAY OF AN ENDING

In grappling with the question of 'what to do' in the context of medical practice, Mol suggests:

The question "what to do" can be closed neither by facts nor arguments...It will forever come with tensions -- or doubt. In a political cosmology "what to do" is not given in the order of things, but needs to be established. Doing good does not follow on finding out about it but is a matter of, indeed, doing. Of trying, tinkering, struggling, failing, and trying again. (2002: 177)

This book offers an account of my attempts to grapple with a range of problems through a process of trying, tinkering and struggling in the context of my own encounters with the multiple forms that development takes; it is what I have tried to

do with these problems. I remain acutely aware that it is not adequate to them:
theoretical problems remain; social and political injustices persist.

My modest hope is that the result helps others (even in disagreement), trying
and tinkering with similar issues, whatever 'ideological' or 'practical' form that
struggle takes.